



# GUIDELINES FOR CONDUCTING A SWAT NEEDS ASSESSMENT

Policies, procedures and team conformity  
**MAKE THIS YOUR GUIDELINE, TOO.**

BY BLAIR ALEXANDER

In the aftermath of the tragic deaths of four Oakland police officers, which occurred on March 21st, 2009, the California Association of Tactical Officers (CATO) stepped forward to conduct an independent evaluation of the Oakland Tactical Operations Team's policies and procedures. This evaluation was headed up by internationally renown SWAT experts, Sid Heal and Ken Hubbs. CATO's exhaustive review produced a total of 35 recommendations aimed at not only improving the team's policies and procedures, but also ensuring the team's conformity with the California POST SWAT Guidelines.

One of CATO's recommendations was that the Oakland Tactical Operation Team conduct an agency-specific SWAT team needs assessment. As we delved into the process of completing this assessment it quickly became apparent that there were few SWAT industry guidelines for accomplishing this important task. Nevertheless, by June 2010 we had successfully developed our team's needs assessment, which was approved by our assistant chief of police.

The CATO evaluation is an invaluable tool that Oakland is currently leveraging not just to improve the way we do business, but to potentially save tactical officers' lives. Deriving our SWAT needs assessment was an important step in our improvement process. To the extent that all SWAT teams ought to consider performing their own SWAT needs assessment and because we found that there is no industry roadmap for conducting such assessments, we humbly submit this article with the objective of providing such a roadmap.

## SWAT NEEDS ASSESSMENTS - WHAT ARE THEY?

Most agencies think of their SWAT teams as their fall-back option; the guys called on to handle those field incidents that are either too dangerous or too complex for patrol units.

This occurs for reasons that are well known in the tactical operations community: SWAT teams are specifically trained as teams, leaders, and individuals to handle high-risk critical incidents, tactical teams have special tools to deal with high-risk situations and the law enforcement industry has historically had much success in resolving these situations using such teams. *Yet there are limits to what an agency can expect of its tactical teams.* Many agencies are not adequately funded to equip and train their teams to resolve every tactical contingency. Hence, prudent organizations must take a hard look at what missions they can reasonably expect their SWAT teams to successfully accomplish.

In its 2005 publication, "SWAT Operational Guidelines and Standardized Training Recommendations," (TPS-0369.1) the California Police Officer Commission on Standards and Testing (POST) recognized the requirement for agencies to develop a list of missions that are appropriate to its tactical teams. An excerpt from this publication details this requirement:

***A needs assessment should be conducted to determine the type and extent of SWAT missions and operations appropriate to the particular agency. This assessment should consider the team's capabilities and limitations and should be reviewed periodically.***

More specifically, California POST calls upon police organizations to clearly lay out their SWAT teams' mission essential task list (METL)<sup>1</sup>. Mission essential tasks are those that the SWAT team must successfully perform to accomplish its strategic goals. These goals, as they pertain to field operations, will typically be oriented toward protecting life, while reducing organizational risk.

## HOW TO CONDUCT NEEDS ASSESSMENTS

The basic steps an agency should take for conduct- 

ing a SWAT needs assessment amount to a strategic planning process that should be approached in a systematic manner. As with any planning process in which significant organizational risks are at stake, the agency conducting a needs assessment should include as many stakeholders as possible in that process. The following steps provide a logical sequence that can be used to conduct an agency's SWAT needs assessment.

**STEP 1: Conduct an agency-wide needs assessment to provide an exhaustive listing of the agency's overall mission for field units**

It must be understood that the precursor to arriving at the agency's SWAT needs assessment is a department-wide appraisal of the gamut of operational tasks potentially faced by a department's field units (patrol, special duty, SWAT, etc.). In other words, an agency-wide needs assessment is the first priority. As would be expected in a country with nearly 17,000 law enforcement agencies, every agency faces its own set of unique operational needs<sup>2</sup>. By virtue of an agency's jurisdictional demographics and geography, there are some tasks their field units will simply never be called upon to accomplish. For example, officers at Phoenix PD will not be expected to execute maritime boarding operations. Only after first obtaining the entire universe of potential field missions can an agency choose that subset of missions that will eventually be assigned to its SWAT team.

Researchers may look to the following sources when compiling this overall mission list: computer-aided dispatch records, report management systems, major incident review boards, and internal training subject matter experts. Of course, the analysis should not be limited to what tasks have been performed in the past, but must also include situations that could realistically occur at some unexpected time in the future. Armed with the complete and realistic universe of tasks (the agency-wide mission essential task list or mission set), you have prepared to move to the next step in the SWAT needs assessment process.

**STEP 2: Conduct risk analyses on each task in the agency-wide mission set**

Every mission has attendant hazards and risks. It is incumbent on senior leaders in every law enforcement organization to look at the missions they expect their field units to perform and conduct the following analysis: identify the hazards, determine how the hazards affect risk, and develop controls to mitigate the identified risks<sup>3</sup>. Although the actual conduct of mission risk assessments is beyond the scope of this article, most agencies can perform this task by modifying their standard risk assessments using screening criteria that result in numerical representations of overall mission risk. Consequently, the total population of agency-wide field missions can be ordered from highest to lowest in terms of risk.

**STEP 3: Examine the agency's SWAT mission history**

The SWAT mission history must be explored in order to obtain a perspective on what tasks the agency has previ-

ously deemed too risky, dangerous or complex for its normal field units to handle. Gathering this information ought to be less challenging than required in Step 1. Most SWAT teams do a good job of cataloguing their operational after-action reports, allowing analysts to quickly and accurately understand the types of missions and capabilities their SWAT teams have been called on to execute in the past. Bearing in mind that this historical task listing will likely not hold valid after all the steps in the needs assessment process have been completed, the past provides an institutional benchmark for those missions the agency has historically placed in its SWAT team's hands.

**STEP 4: Survey other SWAT teams to obtain their SWAT mission essential task lists**

As part of the needs assessment process, examine task lists from other departments including their SWAT teams' mission essential task lists. Ideally, surveys should be sent not only to the SWAT teams in the local area, but also to teams in agencies throughout the nation with similar environmental variables (i.e. demographics, geography, gang profiles, etc.). The feedback from local agencies provides an understanding of the capabilities of sister SWAT teams. This is also useful information when a future incident requires mutual aid. Learning the SWAT mission sets of agencies that share similar operational circumstances is helpful in benchmarking against peer departments; the results offer a "sanity check" for agencies performing their SWAT needs assessments.

**STEP 5: Determine what missions from the agency-wide mission set should be assigned to SWAT**

This step is the crux of the SWAT needs assessment. Based on the risk analyses performed in Step 2, the historical information pulled in Step 3, and the benchmarking effort of Step 4, the agency is ready to decide which field missions are too risky to be handled by non-SWAT units. However, it is critical that this decision be made independent of the agency's resource constraints. In this step the agency is simply deciding, based solely on its risk tolerance, what missions ought to be executed by SWAT-type units, but not necessary its SWAT unit. Step 5 yields the SWAT needs assessment in general and does not specify that the agency's own SWAT team will be responsible for performing the derived mission set. The choice as to whose SWAT team retains the actual mission-by-mission ownership is revealed in Step 6.

**STEP 6: Determine resources required to be proficient in each SWAT mission and decide which missions the agency's SWAT team will own**

This step is probably the most difficult of all. SWAT missions are collective tasks – that is, tasks that require more than one individual or set of individuals (sub-teams within SWAT) to complete. Therefore, arriving at an estimation of the resourcing required for proficiency in each SWAT mission perforce demands a complete listing of the sub-unit (e.g. entry, sniper, negotiators, etc.) collective tasks, along with a further listing of supporting leader and individual tasks. Once all

these ancillary tasks are determined, resources in terms of staffing, equipping, and training to initially acquire, and then subsequently maintain proficiency at every task level can be loaded into cost of "mission ownership." Agencies that under-resource their SWAT teams risk mission failure. This can lead to tragic consequences. Therefore, at the end of this step, the agency should have determined those missions its SWAT team can afford to include in its mission set. Those missions the department cannot pay for are then addressed in the final step.

**STEP 7: For SWAT missions that will go unresourced, find outside agency partners who will take, or help support, their accomplishment.**

This final step completes the needs assessment process. After making the tough choices of which SWAT missions it will retain internally in Step 6, the agency must find partners who will assist in performing the missions the department cannot afford, but still need to be addressed. The methodologies and techniques for accomplishing this will vary based on each department's circumstances and political skill. For smaller agencies whose SWAT members join with other agencies' SWAT members to form regional teams, detailed memorandums of understanding are usually employed to define responsibilities and (financial) obligations. Mid-sized municipal departments that operate collateral duty SWAT teams may find it advantageous to contract the service of the county sheriff's SWAT team to handle unresourced mission requirements. Finally, large departments with full-time teams may only require outside help under the most extreme

conditions, in which case they may want to establish pre-planned mutual aid protocols to fulfill their mission shortfall. The bottom line is that regardless of budgetary shortages, agencies have an obligation to figure out how to successfully accomplish all the tasks that come out of the needs assessment process. ☘

**REFERENCES**

1. The Mission Essential Task List concept is borrowed from the United States Army, *Field Manual 7-0, Training For Full Spectrum Operations*, December 2008.
2. From the Federal Bureau of Investigation's Uniform Crime Reports website at <http://www.fbi.gov/about-us/cjis/ucr/ucr>. Accessed November 7, 2010.
3. The concept of risk management outlined here is borrowed from United States Army, *Field Manual 5-19, Composite Risk Management*, August 2006.

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